Age Arts

The best was first and last

Zubin Mehta

Lorin Maazel

RECORDS | Kenneth Hince

ONE OF the year's most pleasant records was also one of the latest: it was reviewed here only a fortnight ago.

Made in Sydney for Musica Viva, with performances of the **Op. 47 Piano Quartet** of Schumann and the **Quartet Movement** of Mahler, this is a well-judged sample of the kind of concert-hall playing on which Musica Viva has established itself.

The recording (YPRX-1487) is very closely defined: the playing, by the Beethoven Quartet of Rome, admirable: and of course it is notable as a first recording of the Mahler, one of a handful of early works to escape his careful tidying-up of the manuscripts.

This is a first recording from Musica Viva and represents their complete catalogue.

Other small companies have continued to scratch the surface of Australian music, as in past years, though few of their records have come across this desk for review. An exception was **George Dreyfus' George Dreyfus —Live!** (TF-002), an entertaining and instructive account of some of the things involved in being a professional composer in Australia.

Otherwise it has fallen largely to World Record Club, as in the past, to market Australian music. Their 1978 programme maintained roughly the same flow of releases, mostly from ABC masters and tapes. In May, for instance, they issued the 15th of a series of locally made recordings, with Leslie Howard playing 13 works for solo piano by Percy Grainger (R-03433), decently played, fairly flatly recorded, altogether pleasant.

Grainger was heard later in the year as pianist, with a recording from RCA (VRLI-0168) engineered from an old Duo-Art piano roll which he made in 1921 of the Grieg Piano Concerto. With an accompaniment added by the Sydney Symphony Orchestra under John Hopkins, this should remain a monumental curiosity of Western music.

Among my pleasant memories of recorded music in 1978 are:

- THE FINE PERFORMANCE of the **G Minor Symphony** of Mozart given by Zubin Mehta and the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra on Decca SXLA-6844. Few mannerisms in this playing; an honest account of the finest symphonic work in the history of Western music.
- THE EXCELLENT SINGING of the London Madrigal Singers in a collection of Vaughan Williams' arrangement called **The Springtime of the Year** (World Record Club R-03514).
- AND THAT of the Richard Hickox Singers in two of the **Latin Masses** of Sebastian Bach (Argo ZRG-873).
- THE PERCEPTIVENESS of Lorin Maazel in discovering that there are still a few points to be made in music as familiar as the **C Minor Symphony** of Beethoven (CBS SBR-235909).
- THE INGENUITY of Rene Clemencic in bringing together a bewildering menagerie of old instruments for four records of music from **Carmina Burana** (World Record Club R-03244/7); and my own debt to him for reminding us that there is a great volume of music in the manuscript, despite the trivial Orff concoction.
- THE STAGGERING BRILLIANCE of the piano-playing of Michele Campanella, whose performance of Liszt on a record issued in September (Nixa SPLP-1532) brought to life a tradition which had been ailing for decades.

THIS HAS BEEN my first year with **"The Age"**. I joined the staff in February, but did not settle down to regular work until May.

In these few months, I have not come to grips with the problems of the market. But it is obvious already that they are as serious, and as far from solution, as they were when I knew the position two or three years ago.

Supply to retailers is erratic. Many fine new records made in England, America and Europe get no local release, except on long-term special order. Local agents and wholesalers are confused about their roles, and the bigger ones are generally preoccupied with the popular music market —which of course is where their returns come from.

EMI, for example, is in a fine state of confusion. Holding the franchise for the major English companies, its system of marketing classical records in Australia remains haphazard.

This year it appointed, for the first time I recall, a promotions officer for classical records in Melbourne. Within months, he was gone again, and it is hard either to get reviewers' access to the new records, or to know the effect of the new policy of air-freighting classical records from England against estimated orders.

This corresponds pretty well with what I have been able to see in the operations of the other companies—CBS, Phonogram and so on.

Only World Record Club keeps its smooth accessible front, and it is interesting to see how well this chimes in with the importance it now has as a showcase in Australia for the world recording of serious music.

Much of the material in its regular programmes is re-issued, not new. Much, again, comes up for sale quite a while after its release abroad, even when there has been no earlier Australian release.

But World Record Club has, through sheer persistence and an accurate reading of the Australian demand, come to occupy a very significant place in our trade in classical records.

Its products are generally reliable. Its programme selection is sensible. It keeps in print many performances, and many obscure works, which we could not buy otherwise.

I hope, during 1979, for closer relations with the other Australian wholesalers, better understanding of their problems, and more easy access to their material. Next year's annual retrospect should give a fair picture of how this hope, and the state of the market, have fared in those 12 months.

NEXT WEEK: The year in Art and Television

To architects Smrekar is king of kitsch

Ermin Smrekar

By NORMAN DAY, our architecture critic

MOCK-MEDIAEVAL, pseudo-Italian, Costa Brava white and Tel Avivesque: it's all the work of Melbourne architect Ermin Smrekar.

Most architects think of him as the king of kitsch or the pap of pop.

But Smrekar is in fact a most important, concerned and talented individualist.

He speaks in terms of the traditional architectural values: form, shapes and colors. He uses the words "intense", "energetic" and "strong" freely in conversation.

His buildings have strong forms, energetic shapes and intense colors. He likes it that way.

"People love my buildings," he explains. (He doesn't often use the word architecture). "They fulfil the functions, and the people are happy. What else do you want?"

Smrekar looks like a young Burt Lancaster. His hair is ruffled, his jaw strong, his eyes a concentrated blue.

He brings the full strength of his Italian heritage to an amazing array of buildings which are individually recognisable but not universally acclaimed.

Ermin Smrekar was born in Trieste in 1931 and came to Melbourne in 1956. After beginning architectural studies in Italy, he completed them at the RMIT. In 1964 he was registered as an architect and worked "all over the place" for three years before opening his own practice in 1967.

Since then he has designed hotels, motels, restaurants, churches, schools, shops and houses from Tasmania to Surfers Paradise.

The Old Melbourne Motor Inn, Flemington Road is probably his best-known building.

Its recreative nostalgia, corny-cheap ornament and decorative "olde" lacework are anathema to the local architectural cognoscenti. Yet in its own way it heralds a revolutionary approach to designing a building.

The mixture of textured brickwork, Disneyland buildings, massed colors and materials is the work of an artist who uses everything available to him as a source of inspiration.

Not for him the selective puritanism of a "modern" architectural style, which is grey concrete, angular forms and some passively applied primary colors on the exposed structure.

Old Melbourne is a feast of architectural expression; an overdose of forms and styles.

But Ermin Smrekar is no radical revolutionary.

"I never meet with other architects," he explains. "They don't have their feet on the ground.

"My work doesn't meet with their rigid parameters of architectural 'good taste'."

Despite his great amount of building and its immense variety over the past 11 years, he has never been honored with an architectural award — or even a write-up in an architecture journal.

What characterises a Smrekar building?

Very little is predictable, although the curving brick wing walls, mixed materials and unfashionable mansard roofs recur in many of his designs.

He is eclectic, an architectural bower bird who uses all the materials, forms and colors he can muster. And he is economical with them.

They are not imitation brick panels or false beams.

"My brickwork holds up my buildings; I enjoy doing it all with flair and speed, but it all works," he says.

So on some townhouses in Kew the capping row of brickwork is a burnt down trim — decorative as well as functional — over otherwise blank white brick walls.

The decorated concrete sections of the Veneto Social Club in Bulleen are not just for show — they are the structural framework.

It's an economy of means that stretches the most from each component of the building to contribute to a final whole.

Sometimes it's just a little detail. For example, at San Giorgio Restaurant, Carlton, he wanted a bent circular handrail between the first floor and ground floor porch.

The usual architectural approach would be to draw a series of complex details and commission a metalwork specialist to build the unusual form — at great expense. Smrekar simply twisted a large diameter SEC plastic pipe, filled it to give rigidity and painted it orange.

His is an architecture of inclusion.

For the Fisherman's Wharf restaurant beside Corio Bay, Geelong, the concrete base walls are formed in the shape of a boat's keel. A sky-blue, continuous glass strip separates the "keel" from a brown mansard roof which is shaped to reflect it.

In simple terms, this waterside restaurant is a ship — but it doesn't float.

It's an architect conjurer's trick, make-believe pantomime, an individual kitsch style — or post-modern eclecticism — depending which way you take it.

"If you don't approve, bad luck," says Smrekar.

For St. Luke's church, Lalor, the message is clear.

Two large roof forms stretch over the building, then rise to a central staggered point with a glittering stained-glass window between them. They are praying hands — made from steel frames, with the cladding painted white.

Smrekar believes in total design.

Like many architects with an Italian heritage, he favors all-embracing concepts to the more commonly practised half-way approach of most local architects.

So he designs acrylic light fittings, signs, table lights, furniture, special doors and dramatic altars to complement his buildings.

"I use my clients to please myself and them; I make no imposition," he explains. "My clients get what they understand and what they like."

He and they obviously like glass.

Designs for the Rarity and Cuggi shops are brilliant, glistening caverns of glass, mirrors, chrome and light.

Huge C-U-G-G-I letters are built as part of the shop-front, their shapes continue into the interior as a silver ceiling.

It's theatrical and commercial. The building is a sign and the design becomes the advertising symbol.

Smrekar has at once solved the two problems of function and show. It works and it glows.

"I respect my clients," he says. "People will spend if they have faith in their architect."

"You would have to travel a long way to find another instrument like this"

Austrian organ voicer Mr. Klaus Knoth at the console of the organ in Adelaide.

The giant festival theatre organ is moved easily into place at centre stage.

by JO WILES

Breathing voice into a giant

IT is midnight and Adelaide's dazzling Festival Centre is wrapped in darkness.

The plaza, filled with noisy theatre crowds a few hours earlier, is deserted.

You could think yourself alone, but downstairs, locked inside the 2000-seat theatre concert halls, three men are "breathing" sound into the silence.

They are Klaus Knoth, 43, Richard Howell, 29, and apprentice Martin Pasi — organ builders from Vorarlberg, in Austria — who are giving a "voice" to one of the world's most expensive and unusual organs.

It is the Silver Jubilee $500,000 organ, which has taken the Austrian firm Rieger Orgelbau 18 months to design, a year to build and four and a half months to assemble on stage.

The organ is lavish in its detail. It has 4260 lead and tin pipes, 50 ebony and ivory stops, a set of Spanish trumpets, and soon it will have a specially commissioned painting above the keyboard.

Even the color of the organ has been given meticulous attention.

It took four months of negotiations between the organ builders and the Festival Centre trustees to decide on a deep red wood stain instead of the brown color the trustees wanted.

"You would have to travel a long way to find another instrument like this," says Richard Howell, gesturing towards the magnificent red and gun-metal grey organ.

"In many ways, it is the most challenging and complicated contract we have ever had."

The concert hall has presented the organ builders with three big challenges.

They have had to assemble and "voice" the 12-tonne spruce organ on a stage which is constantly in use; they have had to put the instrument away after each night's work; and they have had to double its volume to overcome the hall's dead acoustics.

In meeting those challenges, they have had to work in the dead of night, add almost an extra 1000 pipes to the original 3300, and create a movable organ.

It is unique: it is the only organ which can be moved as easily as a supermarket trolley.

By inflating the special air cushions concealed under the 8.5 metre instrument, two men can push it into the centre stage for an organ recital, to the side for a choral concert, or to the back when an opera or ballet is being performed.

The organ, which is tuned in a special way to prevent it going out of tune through being bumped, is stored in a custom-built garage offstage.

There, behind the stage door, the organ-building trio come each night to wheel their creation on to the stage centre and blast the silence with occasional notes.

"We have to have absolute silence so that we can listen to the sound as the audience would," says Mr. Howell.

"In a church one can work more or less from Sunday night to Saturday evening without any interruptions, but here, with rehearsals and people working all the time, it has to be done at night."

While Richard Howell plays each note, Klaus Knoth moves about the concert hall tuning the organ so that the sound is the same in each theatre seat.

He is constantly listening to and adjusting the pipes for the right sounds, loudness and tone. Eventually, the notes within each stop will have the same character.

The organ's longest pipe of five metres emits a sound like a congregation breathing out at once; the shortest, a sound like the squeak of a 10 mm long church mouse.

But there is nothing ecclesiastical about the organ.

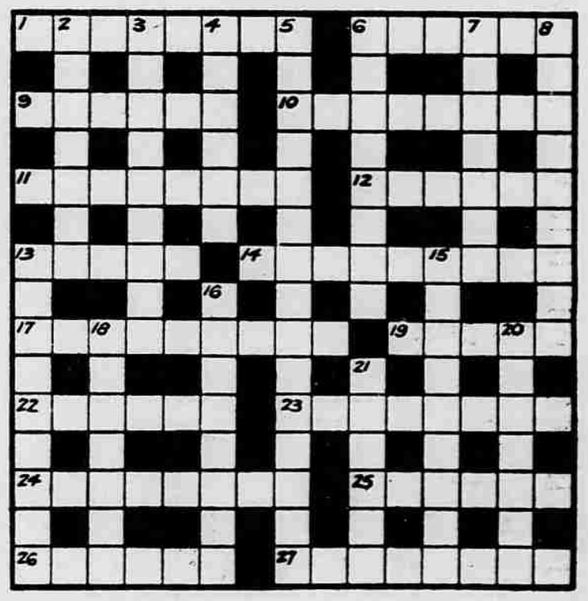
"Most church organs have a range between sad and gloomy," says Mr. Howell. "We are trying to create something that will really excite people. We want to make it a cheerful sound.

"We believe that if the sound is really first class, then even those people who have not been trained to listen will still find it exciting and good."

The organ builders, who have almost finished their nightly 12-hour stints, hope that a celebrated organist like Pierre Cocherau, of Notre Dame, Paris, will give the organ its first public performance.

Richard Howell tunes the festival organ.

SATURDAY CROSSWORD No. 1196



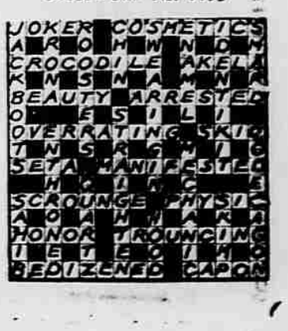
ACROSS

1 Furniture in casualty wards? (8).
6 Spring's writing causes convulsions (6).
9 The trouble capers get you into (6).
10 Nickname of little goblin found in study (8).
11 No need to fast, sister, in this town (8).
12 Little beast swallows her dear little baby (6).
13 Departs to return to regimental HQ (5).
14 Controller of intake, etc., including one in India, perhaps (9).
17 Goal of the big-game hunter? (4, 5).
19 Some tell them religiously (5).
22 But she couldn't be Cain's victim (6).
23 Current name for Lancashire's cotton workers? (4-4).
24 No ill-feeling? Just the opposite (8).
25 Going bad, as Yard boss did (6).
26 They thread their way into the wood (6).
27 Circle Line? Central too (8).

DOWN

2 He gives himself a good hiding (7).
3 Billy takes the blame (9).
4 They just happen to be themselves (6).
5 But his promotion shouldn't be so shortlived! (6, 2, 7).
6 A large town has gas turned on for brightness (8).
7 Seven magnificent orientals (7).
8 Some grit needed to make deposits in these (9).
13 They are in keeping (9).
15 OK to proceed with this sale (9).
16 Skid Row types, USA, right? Life ruined (8).
18 Filial ingratitude "—— than a serpent's tooth" (Lear) (4).
20 Falling-off in refuse (7).
21 A girl is worried about nothing (6).

SOLUTION TO SATURDAY CROSSWORD No. 1195



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